

TESTIMONY OF

GULF STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

PRESENTED BY

LARRY B. SIMPSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ON

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE MAGNUSON - STEVENS ACT

PRESENTED BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS AND FISHERIES

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

DECEMBER 14, 1999

My name is Larry B. Simpson and I am the Executive Director of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the need for regionally based, state-federal cooperative programs for the collection and management of data for marine and estuarine fisheries resources. This issue has been a top priority of the Commission for the last ten years and is evident in the Fisheries Information Network structure that has been established during that time. Most recently, the Congress has been supportive of our efforts by providing partial funding to implement this comprehensive regional program. While we have currently demonstrated improvements to data collection efforts in the Gulf, if we are able to increase the appropriation to the full amount required, we could provide the data tools necessary to address the many complex technical, infrastructural, and administrative issues associated with collecting and managing fisheries data that face us all now and into the future.

The 1996 Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) provided for the establishment of a national program for fisheries data by requiring the development of a Vessel Registration System (VRS) and a Fisheries Information System (FIS). I would like to comment on the Report to Congress, submitted in 1998, entitled "Proposed Implementation of a Fishing Vessel Registration and Fisheries Information System." It is important to remember that, in the Gulf of Mexico region, we began the development of such a program well in advance of the SFA language, and to a great extent the Fisheries Information Network forms the backbone of the proposed actions contained in the VRS/FIS report.

It should be pointed out that we largely agree with the content of the VRS/FIS report. I want to inform you where we are taking action on items contained in the report, the current status of those actions, and highlight areas where we have resolved issues identified in the report or disagree with items contained

therein.

- With the establishment of the FIN several years ago, the GSMFC passed a formal resolution to the effect that the FIN should serve as the vehicle through which the VRS/FIS is implemented. As you will note in the report, NMFS is recommending that same implementation strategy.
- The GSMFC developed a Memorandum of Agreement on data confidentiality, which came into full force in 1993, including as signatories the States of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida; the GSMFC, and the Southeast Regional Office of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). This agreement largely addresses confidentiality concerns raised in the report.
- We strongly endorse the development and management of a vessel registration system; however, we are on record as **not endorsing** the mechanism of using the U.S. Coast Guard as the data base management entity for the system. While we are on record as objecting, we are not raising this issue again for resolution. I just felt that you should be aware of our concerns and position.

- Through the FIN, the partners determined earlier that trip-level resolution should be the basis for commercial data collection. That means that we agree to establish trip ticket programs in each state. Florida and Louisiana have implemented trip ticket programs, and efforts are underway in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama in preparation for implementation of trip ticket programs.
- As a general comment, we agree that substantial increases in funding will be required to fully implement a national program. Having said this, I am not totally sure that the funding levels used in the report accurately reflect reality. I know that the funding made available to the GSMFC and states in the Gulf region has an effect on the funding levels in the report, but I am unsure what that effect is. Suffice it to say, the funding issue probably needs to be revisited on an annual basis, as things evolve. Let me also say that we support substantial increases for data collection and management.
- We agree that the biological sampling component of our data program needs to be supported. Additional funding and resources are required to adequately address the required level of biological sampling, primarily age data. Regarding techniques used to analyze otoliths for age data, the GSMFC, its member states, and the NMFS have begun an initiative in the Gulf region to establish standardized protocols for collecting otoliths and preparation and interpretation of otolith samples. Completion of that task should adequately address aging issues for stock assessment purposes. Additionally, we are moving toward the development of a statistically based biological sampling procedure; however, the three species listed, king and Spanish mackerel and red snapper, are all federally managed species. In a fully state-federal cooperative program, state and interstate species should also be prioritized highly.
- The report states that the Gulf region has not yet begun to consider data base design and architecture. At the time of the report, that was partially true; however, we have since

established that the FIN will work cooperatively with our Atlantic coast counterpart (ACCSP) to use largely the same data management system. We have recently implemented a project to establish the data management system in the GSMFC office and will be integrating Louisiana's trip ticket data into the system. Assuming success of this initial effort, the other state trip ticket programs will be added as soon as they are implemented.

- Of significant importance is the decision on the part of the GSMFC and its member states that the GSMFC will serve as the centralized data management center for the Gulf of Mexico. This decision was based largely on the model provided by the Pacific Fisheries Information Network (PacFIN) and the Pacific Recreational Fisheries Information Network (RecFIN). We have already begun to pursue this approach with computer hardware and software purchases and technical staff to manage the system.

I would also like to comment on several sections of S. 1420 as they are relevant to fisheries management. Section 402. Information Management System is of extreme importance to the Commission and its member states, and directly relates to the development and implementation of the FIN. As stated early, the GSMFC has been intimately involved in coordinating the collection and management of both recreational and commercial fisheries to improve management, providing to the public better stewardship of the nation's valuable marine resources. As you know, cultural and economic impacts emanate from fishery management actions. It is our goal to provide sound data, through the FIN, for not only federal management actions but state management as well. Fisheries are shared with respect to jurisdiction and authority, and it is most important that these revenues are directed to commonly held programs and issues.

In addition, the GSMFC, through the endorsement of our Law Enforcement Committee which is made up of the Chief Officers in each state and our federal partners, supports Section 403 of the bill, calling for enhanced enforcement and prosecution of state and federal regulations in the Exclusive Economic

Zone (EEZ). This additional presence and manpower will have positive effects on nationally held marine resources, thereby increasing the contribution back to U.S. citizens who hold ultimate ownership of these resources that are held in the public trust by state and federal fisheries agencies.

In closing, the GSMFC and its member states have exhibited significant leadership in establishing a state-federal cooperative program for the collection and management of fisheries data for the Gulf of Mexico. Our commitment is evident in the actions taken over the last several years, and we continue to conduct activities that will lead us to full implementation. As mentioned earlier, additional funding will be necessary to realize our full potential. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to working with you in the future to improve fisheries management in our Nation's coastal waters.

Gulf of Mexico - Important Facts

- The Gulf of Mexico receives drainage from two-thirds of the continental United States, largely through the Mississippi River.
- It boasts almost half of the nation's coastal wetlands and five of the top ten U.S. fishing ports.
- Gulf shrimp are the nation's second most valuable fishery, trailing only Alaska salmon.
- Seventy-two percent of the country's offshore oil and 97 percent of our offshore gas production comes from rigs in the Gulf.
- Over half of the Gulf Coast shellfish growing areas have been closed.

- Marine debris on Gulf Coast beaches has averaged better than one ton per mile - and almost two tons per mile

along some stretches of the Texas coastline.

- With a coastline of approximately 1,630 miles, the U.S. Gulf Coast is longer than the U.S. Pacific Coast from

California to Washington, and is equivalent to the distance from Newport, Rhode Island, to Miami, Florida.

- The coastal wetlands of the northern Gulf provide habitat for four to seven million migratory waterfowl every

winter.

- Nearly 50 species of fishes or shellfish are harvested for commercial and recreational consumption in Gulf waters including oysters, shrimp, crabs, snapper, flounder, mackerel, tuna, and swordfish. Over 200 different

species have been captured in sampling trawls.

- Nearly 40% of total U.S. commercial fisheries landings are from Gulf fisheries.

- The marshes and estuaries along the Gulf Coast serve as nurseries or spawning grounds for 98% of the fishes

caught in the Gulf of Mexico.

- Nearly half of all U.S. import/export tonnage passes through Gulf waters.

- Four of the country's ten busiest ports are in the Gulf of Mexico - New Orleans, Houston, Corpus Christi, and

Tampa - and six Gulf ports are among the top ten U.S. ports handling crude oil.

- Some 33 major river systems drain into the Gulf, carrying pesticides, fertilizers, garbage, and other effluent

from half of the country.

- Louisiana's wetlands are disappearing at the rate of over 30 square miles a year.
- Four of the top five states in the country in total surface water discharge of toxic chemicals are Gulf States -

Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

- The human population of the Gulf Coast is growing; it is estimated that between 1960 and 2010 the population

of Florida and Texas will have grown by 226% and 121%, respectively.

- Per capita consumption has increased to 15 pounds in 1993 with an ever-increasing population.
- The Gulf of Mexico, with a total area of about 600,000 square miles, is surrounded almost completely by the

United States, Mexico, and Cuba.

- The 21 major estuaries along the Gulf Coast account for 24% of all estuarine area in the 48 contiguous states,

and 55% of the marshes.

- Over 50 million people visit the state of Florida each year and spend upwards of \$25 billion.

- Over one million people a year visit Gulf Islands National Seashore which is located in Alabama and Mississippi.
- In the Gulf region of the state of Louisiana, tourism expenditures amount to over \$3 billion annually.
- About \$5 billion in tourism-related expenditures are made in the Texas Gulf region each year.
- Of 346 million pounds of shrimp landed in the United States in 1990, over 70% was landed in the Gulf.
- Of 201.8 million pounds of crabs landed in the United States in 1990, 45.5 million pounds were landed in the Gulf.
- The Gulf States contributed approximately 10.6 of the 29.2 million pounds of oysters landed in 1990, and Louisiana accounted for approximately 75% of this.
- Off the Gulf Coast of Florida, 11.4 million pounds of grouper worth \$19.3 million were landed in 1989. Florida landings also included 4.0 million pounds of snapper worth \$7.9 million. Louisiana landings of snapper were 2.1 million pounds worth \$4.4 million.
- Louisiana fishers caught 8.6 million pounds of yellowfin tuna worth \$16.3 million; in Texas, 3.1 million pounds of yellowfin tuna were landed worth \$6.2 million.

- In 1989, total Gulf landings of shark were 11.5 million pounds, for which fishers were paid \$5.5 million.
- In 1985, 4 million residents of the Gulf States fished the Gulf of Mexico for sport. Texas led all other states with

nearly 1.7 million residents fishing the Gulf, followed by Florida with more than 1.5 million, Louisiana with 550,000, Alabama with 130,000, and Mississippi with 80,000. Residents and non-residents took more than

24

million fishing trips in the Gulf. More than 80% of the recreational catch was in inland waters or within offshore state waters.

- On November 11, 1947, the Kerr-McGee Oil Company completed the first commercially well drilled completely

beyond the sight of land. Today, the Gulf of Mexico is the most active area in the world for offshore oil and gas

activities, and the industry has placed more than 3,600 platforms on the Gulf of Mexico Outer Continental Shelf.

- In the next two decades, the population in almost one-third of Gulf Coastal counties will increase by more than 30%.